

Empty Garden

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Summary: The Half-Life universe has been completely devoid of music for 20 years, but as we all know, music has its way of bringing the longest-hidden emotions to the surface. Oneshot, sometime post-Ep3. Gordon x Alyx. Kind of a songfic, yet kind of not.

Empty Garden

Disclaimer: Obviously, I don't own Half-Life. Those that do should seriously consider working on Episode 3. Please, we're all begging here...

* * *

><p>Sweat poured down Alyx Vance's face as she concentrated on the task at hand. She was vaguely aware of the sun burning her through her t-shirt and several ominous-sounding thumps in the distance. She grit her teethâ€"she only needed to hold on for a few more seconds... "Gordon, where the hell are you?" she ground out through her clenched teeth. For a moment, there was no answer, and then a sudden crash startled Alyx, causing her to fall from her precarious position on the ladder, bringing the open paint can down with her.<p>

After standing up and dusting herself off, Alyx turned around to find Gordon Freeman poking his head through the doorway with a sheepish look on his face. "I... uh... I found the other ladder," he muttered, shuffling awkwardly as Alyx pretended to seethe at him. After a moment, she couldn't help but laugh, righting the overturned paint can before it made too much of a puddle on the tarp that covered the wood floor. "You owe me, big time," she said, feigning annoyance, but fearing that her slight grin would give her away. Gordon hesitantly grinned back and busied himself with setting up the ladder, kicking the paint can back over in the process. Alyx swatted him with the handle end of a paintbrush, rolling her eyes and laughing quietly to herself. She walked over to a window, poking her head out for some fresh air while Gordon cleaned up the spilled paint.

She smiled. Since the destruction of the Borealis and the subsequent abandonment of Earth by the Combine, things had been... better. Not great, but better. Whatever had been inside the legendary ship had probably held the figurative key to the Combine's last hope of restoring orderâ€”their orderâ€”on Earth. Many of the Combine's forces (and most likely, large quantities of their resources) had been destroyed with the ship, and shortly afterwards, the rebels had united for one last push to eradicate most of the remaining large Combine institutions on Earth. Apparently realizing that they were, as Alyx herself had put it, "royally screwed," a large portion of the Combine had saved humanity the trouble and most likely "found a teleporter somewhere and hauled ass back to the home dimension." It had been three months since then, and so far, there had been no sign of a Combine resurgence.

The Combine's return, in fact, was supposed to have been rendered scientifically impossible. Several of the scientists remaining at White Forest had managed to come up with a way to ensure that they could not infiltrate the planet again. Alyx had never really understood the science behind itâ€”all that portal stuff was Gordon's thingâ€”but it made her feel much, much safer.

With the threat of the Combine no longer hanging over everyone's heads, the survivors of the ordeal were slowly trying to find a way to get things back to normal... whatever 'normal' was. She, Gordon, and a handful of former rebels who had remained at White Forest were in the process of trying to restore the White Forest Inn to livable standards, in hopes of turning it into a sort of small apartment complex for groups of refugees to live in. Supplies were scarce, but considering that the personnel at White Forest had contributed a large part to orchestrating the Combine's demise as well as the current relief effort, they had an easier time than some finding and receiving supplies.

Alyx was jolted out of her thoughts as she felt a presence behind her. She turned to see Gordon staring at her, his green eyes sparkling with concern. "You okay?" he asked softly. Alyx blushed... even after all they'd been through, it was still a bit of a shock to hear Gordon speak, and she always found herself incredibly flustered when she was the center of his attention, though she wasn't entirely sure why. He was still a man of few words, but at least now he was a man of some. Despite being hailed as the One Free Man and still holding a position of high esteem in the eyes of most of humanityâ€”herself includedâ€”Alyx always got a kick out of how he appeared to be more intimidated by other people than they were by him. He tended to keep to himself, but Alyx had noticed him slowly opening up... and also noticed herself enjoying his company more and more...

Realizing she had drifted off again and that Gordon was now looking at her with one eyebrow raised as if he was considering the possibility that she had gone completely insane, Alyx blushed harder. "Yeah... just... thinking, I guess," she muttered. "Sorry to freak you out." Gordon, seeming satisfied with her answer, turned and looked around the room behind them, admiring the job they had done painting the walls by the front stairs. In the silence following her own words, Alyx became very aware of the silence around them. As if he had read her thoughts, Gordon spoke again. "It's getting hot out... a lot of the others were complaining and sort of decided on

their own that it was break time. They, erm, kind of took off without us." He shuffled, looking at the floor. Alyx smiled a bit to herself... Gordon did this often, pausing to gather his thoughts if he planned to utter more than a couple of sentences. She found it oddly... adorable? She bit her lip, waiting for Gordon to continue. Finally, he broke the silence. "I guess we're stuck here for a while... unless you want to hike back up to the base, I think there's some, uh, food around here. We could just take a break here. If you want to, that is."

"Yeah... sure, that sounds fine. If you can find a snack, I'll see if I can find somewhere to chill where we won't die from paint fume inhalation." Alyx mentally kicked herself for the statement that had sounded a lot more clever in her head, but a slight smile tugging at the corner of Gordon's mouth suggested that he'd found it at least somewhat amusing. _'Unless he's laughing at me,'_ Alyx thought, then sighed. Jokes about death were still a somewhat touchy subject for the both of them, but at least Gordon probably wouldn't have been laughing if he'd been offended. Right?

Alyx climbed out the open window and walked around to the back of the Inn before she could embarrass herself any further, hopping over one of the low stone walls whose original purpose she'd never quite figured out. Settling down right inside the covered porch-like area near the back door, she leaned back against the wall. While this reconstruction thing was infinitely less exhausting than kicking alien ass and saving the world, she was still tired. She savored the feeling of being off her feet and closed her eyes, waiting for Gordon to catch up.

* * *

><p>Having located an insulated box with a couple of sandwiches preserved insideâ€"probably headcrab, as indicated by "RIP Lamarr" and a large smiley face scrawled across the brown paper bag in what appeared to be Barney Calhoun's handwritingâ€"Gordon stepped outside and looked around for Alyx. He figured she'd probably gone to one of the outbuildings, or the nearly-finished back of the Inn, where the paint fumes were indeed less obnoxious.<p>

As he walked, Gordon's mind wandered to the fate of Lamarr. Considering that she hadn't been seen since the launch of Dr. Magnusson's rocket, the eight and a half pound weight discrepancy that Dr. Kleiner had noticed suddenly made a lot more sense. The poor scientist was still grieving the loss of his pet, though Gordon couldn't quite understand why. He had never shared Barney's complete and utter hatred of Kleiner's headcrab, but it was still a headcrab, and the vast majority of headcrabs that Gordon had encountered had either been attached to a zombie or been actively attempting to turn him into one. Considering the well-organized and relatively successful efforts going on to eradicate all Xen lifeforms from Earth, he figured it was just as well that Lamarr had accidentally committed suicide... since she'd probably have been purposely killed by now otherwise. Because meat was scarce, the slaughtered headcrabs were mostly being eaten by the surviving humans. Though he worried at times about what would happen when the headcrab supply finally ran out, Gordon had to admit that they could be eating worse things. Headcrab tasted kind of like chicken, if he remembered correctly.

As he laughed quietly to himself at the memory of Barney's

undisguised glee upon learning of Lamarr's disappearance after his return to White Forest, Gordon spotted Alyx resting on the porch. _'Glad Barney made it back to us at all, Lamarr or no Lamarr,'_ he thought as he settled down beside her. _'It was starting to look like we were never going to see him again...'_ _Resting his head against the wall behind him, Gordon looked over at Alyx. Her eyes were closed, and there was a small streak of white paint on her cheek, which Gordon felt a sudden urge to wipe off. He blushed and looked away, not entirely sure where that thought had come from. After a moment, Gordon regained his composure and gently shook Alyx's arm. She startled awake, and he couldn't help but crack a smile when he noted the expression on her face. "Oh... you found me," she said, sounding slightly flustered. "Sorry, guess I... dozed off there for a minute." Gordon chuckled softly and handed her a sandwich, enjoying the sound of her laughter as she read Barney's handwritten tribute to his favorite Xen life-form.

They both unwrapped their sandwiches and ate in silence as they became fully aware of just how tired and hungry they were. After devouring most of his sandwich, Gordon relaxed and stared off into space, finding his thoughts wandering back to the events of the night before.

* * *

><p>"New shipment of stuff from the city just came in,' Barney called, poking his head through the doorway. "Might want to take a look, there's all kinds of crap in here. Not sure where it all came from, but..." His voice trailed off as he retreated back down the hallway. Gordon looked over at Dr. Magnusson, who was already rising to his feet. "Well, since it appears I will not even be able to finish a snack in silence," he grumbled, "suppose we should go take a look at whatever Calhoun's all excited about. Coming, Freeman?" Gordon nodded and followed the crabby older scientist. When they arrived in the lobby, if you could call it that, of the base, they found Barney digging through a huge crate of what appeared to be mostly electronic parts. There was a small pile of stuff behind him that Gordon guessed he had deemed 'interesting'. Ignoring Magnusson's rather obnoxious comparison of Barney's rummaging to a squirrel looking for his nuts in the springâ"as if anyone really remembered squirrels anymore, let alone their food-storing habitsâ"Gordon took a closer look at Barney's recovered... artifacts, for lack of a better word. Among the assorted wires, switches, and contraptions, he noticed a small box with a hatch in the front and several buttons, though the majority of the device seemed to be full of... were those speaker holes? He leaned down, picked it up, and turned it around in his hands. Upon closer inspection, it appeared that Gordon's initial hypothesis was correctâ"it was a cassette player.

The small device brought back a flood of memories from Before... his childhood in Seattle, his years at MIT, relaxing after-hours at Black Mesa... Gordon realized with a start how long it had been since he'd actually heard any kind of music. 'Suppose that's just one more thing the Combine took from us,'_ he mused, momentarily depressed by the thought. He carefully set the player down and joined Barney in searching through the crates. _'C'mon,'_ he thought, _'nobody keeps a cassette player around without tapes.'_ He also wondered how _this_, of all things, had survived the Combine rule, but he was no longer one to question miracles. Sure enough, after a few moments of searching, he came up with a partially crushed cardboard box that

made that familiar, nostalgic rattling sound when picked up. Eagerly ripping it open, he began to search through its contents. Barney, having abandoned his search, turned around to face Gordon and his face broke out into an earsplitting grin that Gordon imagined matched his own. "Hey, so there _are _tapes to go with that!" he exclaimed. He, too, began digging through the box, eager to see what treasures it held. Not all of the tapes appeared to be intact, but several had, indeed, survived. The music they contained was mainly what would've been considered 'oldies' Before... mostly artists from the 1960s, '70s, and '80s. Grinning madly, Barney and Gordon gathered up their discovery and ran back to the break room to share their discovery.

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_With the help of an equally enthusiastic Dr. Kleiner, Gordon and Barney managed to take over Magnusson's precious loudspeaker system and soon had one of the tapes playing throughout the entire base. That night, everyone had fallen asleep to voices and songs that they hadn't heard in over twenty years... that others had never heard. Some laughed, some cried, but it was the first time, not counting the Resistance effort, that Gordon could remember seeing so many people moved—perhaps united, in a way—by one common thing. He, like many others, had gone to sleep smiling for the first time in eons. _

* * *

><p>Gordon could feel that earsplitting grin coming on again just thinking about it, and for once, was almost too content with life to bother being embarrassed about it. 'It really had been too long...,' he thought idly, getting nostalgic again. Playing in the back of his mind was the last song he remembered hearing before he'd drifted off to sleep the night before... Elton John's _Empty Garden_. It had been a long-time favorite of his parents, though he had never gotten a chance to ask why before... well, the end of the world. Hearing it again had brought back many long-forgotten memories of his life before The Incident—some good, some bad, but all having been gathering dust in the back of his mind for some time now. As he had been born in 1975, Gordon had only been a few years old when John Lennon, to whom the song was dedicated, had been assassinated, but he vaguely remembered the ripple it had created throughout the world. Shaking his head, he felt a pang of sadness at the thought of a promising life ending so suddenly and tragically.

He briefly contemplated the post-Combine view of death versus the way the media had sensationalized Lennon so many decades before... while it was true that John Lennon's death had been tragic... somehow, the amount of attention it had received seemed strange now, when humanity had become so used to seeing people senselessly slaughtered every day of their lives that they appeared to be nearly unaffected by death. Was it sad that celebrities had been so... worshipped... Before, or that death was so commonplace now that most humans had learned to put up an emotional wall in order to survive, knowing that allowing themselves to think about their loved ones could cause a momentary lapse and lead to their own deaths? Gordon sighed, then supposed it was just as well that Lennon had... died... long before the Combine invasion. For a man so interested in peace, it would've been a disaster too unbelievably difficult to comprehend. Not that it had been much easier for anyone else, of course.

Gordon suddenly found himself caught off guard by his own imagination, laughing out loud at a slight burst of insanity that

conjured up a mental image of The Beatles performing "All You Need is Love" in the plaza of City 17, possibly a desperate final attempt to restore peace through music. With perhaps... striders in the background, and a nice Breencast going on over their heads. Oh, and maybe a gunship or two firing at them, for good measure. Alyx looked up from her sandwich to stare at him as if he had lost his mind, and he abruptly stopped laughing, feeling ashamed. It seemed that Alyx's dark sense of humor that she often used to cope with difficult situations was rubbing off on him... or maybe it was just stress? That really wasn't funny... at all. Gordon was also quite certain that if there had been any mind-reading ex-hippies nearby, that momentary stress-induced vision would've been his death sentence. He allowed a small chuckle to escape at that thought... at least that was slightly funny. Well, maybe.

Remembering Alyx's confusion, he turned to her. "I'm... sorry," he muttered, not quite meeting her eyes. "My imagination got... carried away... for a second." Something flashed across her features, and Gordon realized how badly that statement could be misinterpreted. He blushed, wondering what to do now. "I mean... not... um," he stammered, "anything... uh, just... was thinking. About... life, I guess..." She nodded, seeming to accept this explanation, then abruptly turned away returned to the task of eating. Gordon inwardly groaned. _'How is it that I can write a thesis entitled 'Observation of Einstein-Podolsky-Rosen Entanglement on Supra-quantum Structures by Induction Through Nonlinear Transuranic Crystal of Extremely Long Wavelength (ELW) Pulse from Mode-Locked Source Array' and _still_ have the energy left to essentially save the world with a crowbar, but I can't talk to people without sounding like a mental incompetent?' _he thought, exasperated with himself._ 'Of course, Alyx isn't most people...' _He cut off that train of thought quickly, worried that he might do something else to further humiliate himself. Casting a glance at the last few bites of his headcrab sandwich and deciding that he wasn't really that hungry anymore, Gordon closed his eyes and leaned against the wall, intending to sleep.

_What happened here,
>As the New York sunset disappeared?
I found an empty garden among the flagstones there..._

Gordon smiled, allowing the song to play through his head. A montage of memories ran through his mind at the words... his parents' reactions to Lennon's assassination... listening to the car radio on the way to... school? work? the store?... the first time he had tasted beer, drowning his sorrows with Barney after being rejected by the first and only girl he had ever been foolish enough to ask out... _'Let's not go there right now,'_ he mentally chastised himself, surprised at how much that memory still stung and trying not to think of Alyx, relaxing comfortably just mere inches to his right.

Idly, he wondered how Elton John had felt when he wrote the song. It was clearly written in memory of his dear friend, and of course, Gordon could sympathize with the loss. Several million... billion? times over, if he considered every lost human being to be a dear friend, in a way. He tried to push the thought of the countless humans whose deaths he'd witnessed, some of which he'd indirectly caused out of his mind... he could think about that later. As for _Empty Garden_, he had always viewed the song as an anthem of sadness, but with some hope mixed inâ€"a tribute, as it was intendedâ€"which he figured was what Elton John and Bernie Taupin had

meant to convey. _'Not unlike the situation we're in now...' _he thought, feeling oddly philosophical all of a sudden.

â€| _Who lived here?

>He must have been a gardener that cared a lot,
Who weeded out the tears and grew a good crop,

>And now it all looks strange...

Well, the Earth certainly did look strange, with its nearly empty oceans and disturbing shortage of native wildlife... and people, of course. Gordon supposed the "gardener" could be likened to the God whom many had accused of abandoning His people when the Combine arrived, but of course, Gordon had never been a man of religion. He had never attempted to change the views of another, but his interest in science had presented too many facts and theories about the universe for him to put much stock into the idea of a spiritual deity running things instead. Since waking up from his... sleep... in City 17 several months before, Gordon had quickly learned that it was much easier to rely on his own wits for guidance than it was to look to a being that may or may not exist. He also had difficulty understanding how an all-knowing, all-loving God could allow His people to be slaughtered... His animals and plants to go extinct... His oceans to be drained... His Earth to be picked to the bone by hostile invaders. _'Wasn't that exactly what God was supposed to protect us from?'_ he thought, sighing and remembering why religion had never been his thing. It made his head hurt, while science made total sense. Usually, anyway.

â€| It's funny how one insect can damage so much grain..._

_ 'It is indeed,'_ Gordon mused. _'One experiment gone wrong and the whole world goes to hell...' _Thinking of insects brought to mind the image of the Combine advisor, and Gordon shuddered. _'That's another thing,'_ he thought sadly. _'Step off a lift and twenty seconds later, someone you've looked up to your whole life is gone.'_ He fought back a sudden, surprisingly strong urge to cry as he relived the moment of Eli Vance's death with disturbing clarity. Gordon had come to look up to Eli, and felt especially close to him after spending so much time with his daughter. _'I couldn't be prouder of you if you were my own son...' _Eli's voice echoed in his head.

The period of time immediately following Eli's death had been incredibly difficult for everyone, especially Alyx. Gordon looked at her out of the corner of his eye and noticed that she appeared to be dozing off again, a slight smile playing over her face. He looked away, gently pushing his glasses back up on his nose. Something had changed in her that day... she'd never given up, but there was a small part of her that Gordon knew would always be missing. He silently mourned their loss... of Eli, and so many others, and had a sudden flashback to right afterwards... when he had ignored the voice of reason in his head and awkwardly hugged Alyx, letting her cry in his arms until Kleiner and the others had found them... but he pushed it away. It seemed wrong to think about that now, and he figured he'd just secured himself a special room in hell for allowing him to consider that in any way a _good_ memory. _'And give him one with _extra_ fire, Satan,'_ cracked the insane little voice in Gordon's head that he assumed was also the evil mastermind behind his disturbing Beatles vision. He closed his eyes and leaned back again, trying to ignore his sudden awareness of how close Alyx was... that only a few more inches, and she would be leaning on his

shoulder...

â€| _And what's it for,
>This little empty garden by the brownstone door?
And in the
cracks along the sidewalk, nothing grows no more...
>Who lived here?
He must have been a gardener that cared a lot,

>Who weeded out the tears and grew a good crop,
And we are so
amazed... we're crippled and we're dazed
>A gardener like that one no one can replace.

_ 'I suppose not,' _ Gordon thought, going back to his God metaphor. If there ever had been a God, Gordon was pretty sure He was gone now, and whatever influence He had had over the Earth would be sorely missed. _ 'Not that anyone can really blame Him for getting the hell out of here as soon as He realized what was happening...' _ Certainly, many people had resorted to the most drastic actions to stop the living nightmare, and Gordon fought a rush of sadness thinking about their fates... their lives wasted. Granted, he hadn't been a witness to the suffering for twenty years, and he had a hard time imagining how his closest friends had made it through, but he had never considered... suicide. He had always held on to a small hope that things would get better... and they had, he noted, frantically searching his mind for an example of this that didn't involve the young woman resting beside him.

His train of thought turned sharply and suddenly to his parents, and Gordon found himself wondering what had become of them. He remembered, with a sickly feeling in the pit of his stomach, that they had been vacationing at the time of the resonance cascade... in eastern Europe, though he couldn't remember exactly where. _ 'What were places called before the Combine, anyway?...'_ In a moment of selfishâ€"or perhaps it was selflessâ€"emotion, Gordon found himself almost hoping that they had... taken matters into their own hands. The possibility that he had encountered them... old bloodstains that decorated the streets of City 17 like finger paintings, zombies that he had had no choice but to destroy, stalkers in the Citadel... it was too much to bear. He fought back tears, blinking several times, trying to calm himself.

_ And I've been knocking, but no one answers,
>And I've been knocking most all the day...
Oh, and I've been
calling, oh, hey, hey, Johnny,
>Can't you come out to play?

"Gordon?" Alyx's voice pierced through his thoughts, and he wondered if he'd been talking or... crying...? "Hey, sorry," she continued hesitantly, "you were just, uh, humming." Gordon mentally kicked himself, cringing at how awkward he always seemed to manage to be. There was silence for a moment until Gordon finally managed to bring himself to look over at Alyx. To his surprise, she was smiling... in a friendly way, not in a mocking way. She looked back up at him. "Elton John, right?" she asked, her grin widening. Gordon nodded, wondering where she was going with this. He heard her sigh deeply and her gaze dropped to her lap. "My father used to love that song," she murmured, "and I guess it just reminded me of him." She seemed to be holding back tears, and Gordon scooted slightly closer to her, trying to prepare to comfort her if necessary. As usual, the thought of her being upset both worried and hopelessly confused him. However, Alyx regained her composure and seemed content to stare at her shoes, so

Gordon turned away and did the same.

After several drawn-out minutes of complete silence, Alyx spoke again. "What was it like," she asked, breaking the silence, "y'know, Before?" Her voice contained a sort of breathless excitement, like Gordon imagined he would hear from a child begging for a bedtime story... if he had spent much time with children, anyway. The suppression field had been down for awhile, but no new humans had been born yet that he knew of. If he remembered correctly, it took longer than four months to form a human, so that was probably why. As a matter of fact, the last small child Gordon could remember interacting with had been Alyx herself, but he decided not to mention that at the moment. It made his hyper-awareness of her proximity to him seem even more awkward, with perhaps a hint of creepiness.

Gordon thought for several long seconds before providing an answer to Alyx's question. Tons of adjectives came to mind—bright, exciting, crowded, free—but when he finally spoke, he settled on 'different'. "There were lots and lots of people, and the world had almost anything a person could want," he answered softly. "There was art, and music, and people danced and partied and went to movies and college and stores..." He paused, collecting his thoughts. "I think, though," Gordon continued, sighing, "it took a tragedy that nobody saw coming to make people realize what they took for granted. People worried about little things, put material possessions ahead of their feelings, fought just for the sake of fighting... the world was amazing back then, Alyx. There was so much to have and to see and to do... and so many different nations and cultures... but yet... I think most people were empty on the inside. They had lost sight of what mattered, y'know?" He paused again, and then a slight grin brightened his features as he continued excitedly. "I'd give anything to go back, though. To go to a movie..." Actually, Gordon had never been much into movies, preferring to spend most of his time studying, but it was an experience he'd wished he'd spent more time enjoying. "... eat hamburger made out of something that doesn't turn people into zombies, swim in the ocean, go to a concert, walk in the park..."

He trailed off, suddenly aware that he was probably babbling by now. She seemed somewhat stunned—Gordon realized after a moment or two that that was most likely the longest string of words he had managed to put together since she'd known him—but she recovered fairly quickly. "I barely remember it," she murmured. "The Combine... the Resistance... it's what I grew up with. What the world used to be like... it still sounds so different that I can't really imagine it. My dad used to tell me stories about what life was like... Before... and that song..." She choked on a sob, and Gordon's mind went blank. He wasn't sure why he felt so affected by her sadness, but he'd never been very good at dealing with crying women. 'Especially... uh, beautiful?... crying women,' he added to himself, wondering exactly how that thought had edged its way into his brain. Hesitantly, Gordon placed his hand over hers, nervously anticipating her reaction and hoping that he wouldn't accidentally upset her more.

Alyx looked up at him, seeming surprised, but her eyes sparkled and her face showed a hint of a smile, despite her tears. Gordon's mind went completely blank... what exactly was the social protocol for this? Wordlessly, she closed the gap between them and gently rested her head on his shoulder. Despite the empty feeling of sadness

surrounding them that was almost palpable, Gordon felt... alive, in that instant. More than he ever had before, perhaps. Slowly, he laced his fingers with hers and leaned back against the wall, savoring the feeling of her skin touching his.

* * *

><p>Alyx wasn't really sure how long she and Gordon had been sitting there, or how they had ended up like this. Having since regained most of her composure, she found herself wondering what to do next. She was comfortable for the momentâ€"very comfortable, as a matter of factâ€"but they couldn't stay here forever. _'Not that that would be completely horrible...'_ nagged the little voice in the back of her head. Alyx willed herself to keep from blushing or shaking her head, worried that any small movement on her part would scare Gordon back into his shell.

She'd noticed recently that he was starting to interact with other people more and more over time, and he seemed to be particularly warm towards her, but she had a feeling that this particular... encounter... was going to end badly. Despite being considerably more vocal and even revealing a sense of humor as of late, physical and emotional displays of... affection? still weren't really his thing. Gordon still seemed very haunted by what they had all been through, which of course was not at all surprising. _'He's been getting better, though,'_ Alyx thought, remembering the first few weeks after their return from the _Borealis_ mission. Though she had suspected for quite awhile that Gordon hated his HEV suit with a passion, it had been several days before he had finally managed to bring himself to remove it. Despite the fact that some of the former rebels seemed to think differently, as she had overheard in their late-night conversations, Alyx thought he looked better without the suit. He looked more... humanâ€"less like a character in one of the old comic books her father had kept for her to read. Besides, he was clearly better suited to wear a lab coat than an HEV suit, though Alyx had to admit that he didn't look too bad in his current white t-shirt and worn jeans, either.

Then of course, there was the gravity gun, which Gordon had finally decided to stop carrying around a few days after he ditched the suit. The final straw had occurred when Alyx had walked in on Gordon trying to pour himself a cup of waterâ€"holding the pitcher with the gravity gun. She had apparently startled him, causing him to hit the device's primary fire and launch the full pitcher through the window opposite the counter and directly into the lap of a quickly enraged Dr. Magnusson. She barely managed to avoid laughing out loud at the memoryâ€"not surprisingly, the ensuing confrontation had been hysterically funny, at least from her point of view. That had been the end of Gordon's attachment to the gravity gun, thankfully, and she hadn't seen him holding any sort of weapon since then, though she imagined he still slept with his crowbar by his bed. She couldn't blame him for that, really, since she still slept with her gun beside hers. She let her mind wander for a moment, then blushed as she banished an image that her overactive imagination had conjured up out of nowhere. She vowed not to think the words "Gordon" and "bed" in the same sentence for awhile, praying that Gordon couldn't sense what was going on in her head.

Alyx bit her lip, thinking. She'd been afraid to acknowledge that Gordon acted differently around her, figuring that a man who could

have his choice of almost any woman he wanted would be more interested in a quiet, science-y type like himself, but their current... situation... clearly changed things. _'Then again,'_ she thought, biting her lip a little harder, _'who's to say this means he's... interested in me? Maybe he just feels sorry for me. Heck, does he even... like people?_' She couldn't remember Gordon ever having expressed romantic interest in... anyone, and the many stories she'd heard about him had never once included a mention of a girlfriend or even a love interest. For reasons she doubted she would ever understand, Gordon still seemed to be 27 years old, despite the fact that people who had been his age when he worked at Black Mesa were now in their forties. She couldn't decide if that was creepy, or if it was some... lucky? twist of fate that she should just go with. Considering how comfortable and safe she felt being this close to Gordon, she decided it wasn't creepy. _'Creepy wouldn't feel this good, right?...'_

The only small indications that Alyx had heard to suggest that Gordon might be somewhat interested in her came in the form of endless jokes from Barney Calhoun, who had eagerly taken over her father's job of completely mortifying her at least once a day soon after his reappearance into their lives. However, Barney's sense of humor tended to be a little... overkill. Her dad's jokes had always been well-meaningâ€”as awkward as the situation was, Alyx had known that he did it out of love, for both her and Gordon. Besides, Eli's jokes about the suppression field being down and "doing their part" were comparatively subtle, given that Barney's big joke the day before had involved a number of casual comments about possible "alternate" uses for Gordon's crowbar, most of which involved her... and of course, these suggestions had been made in the middle of the break room in front of Dr. Kleiner, Dr. Magnusson, and various other members of the former resistance. She wasn't sure everyone had heard, but it had still been pretty awkward, and a blush crept across her face at the memory. Alyx was pretty sure Barney meant wellâ€”and at least she could be grateful that they finally had time to put so much energy into such things as childish immaturity instead of saving the world from aliensâ€”but she had briefly entertained the notion of bashing his skull in while he slept that night. With Gordon's crowbar, of course.

She wondered what Gordon was thinking right now. Unable to avoid a rush of embarrassment, she realized that after working in the sun all day, she probably didn't smell particularly attractive right now. Her feeling of dread increasing, she also felt something flaking on her cheek... probably paint. She wondered what else was smeared all over her face, and decided to be glad she didn't have access to a mirror right now. Several strands of her hair had fallen loose from her headband, and her t-shirt was starting to ride up from leaning back so long, exposing a sliver of dark skin right above the waistband of her faded jeans. She debated moving to pull it down, but didn't want to ruin the moment. Not yet.

Despite her racing thoughts, Gordon seemed... inexplicably relaxed. Alyx could feelâ€”and hearâ€”his even breaths and though his pulse felt like it was racing at the spot where their wrists touched, he didn't seem disturbed by it. She was a bit surprised that he couldn't seem to hear her heart, which was threatening to pound its way right out of her chest. As she noticed her palms sweating, Alyx mentally berated herself for acting so foolish. _'Get a grip, girl,'_ she thought, irritated at her loss of control of her own body. _'It's

just Gordon. Any minute now, he's going to realize how weird this is and get up and walk off and pretend nothing happened.' _ She involuntarily sighed, then gulped as she felt Gordon's head turn. _'Well, okay, that's one way to speed up that process... nice one, Alyx.' _

To her surprise, however, Gordon didn't make any move to escape. Shyly, Alyx turned her head to face him, struck for the umpteenth time at how... attractive... he actually was. His impossibly bright green eyes locked on hers, and Alyx gulped, her heart racing. _'Do I say something?...'_ The side of Gordon's mouth twitched up to form a small smile, and he tightened his grip on her left hand. He looked as if he wanted to say something, but perhaps thought the better of it. _'Is he about to?...'_ Alyx's racing mind wondered, right before Gordon leaned forward, effectively closing the gap between them, and gently touched his lips to hers.

Alyx hesitated for a split second, her mind having gone totally blank. She knew Gordon was all for scaling impossibly tall cliffs in near darkness, fighting off hordes of zombies, and marching right into the headquarters of a race of cruel, invasive aliens that was hell-bent on killing him—possibly even all at the same time—but this was one thing she had not expected him to do _at all_... She felt Gordon hesitate as well, and wondered if he was about to freak out... realize he had made a mistake, that this wasn't what he wanted. To her relief, he relaxed after a moment, and Alyx, feeling her heart start to beat again, followed suit. Having admittedly never... done this before, Alyx had no idea if she was doing anything right, but _damn_, it felt good. Becoming aware of an increasingly urgent need to breathe, she finally broke away. Opening her eyes, she looked up to see Gordon blushing madly and staring awkwardly down at his lap. Holding back a sudden urge to crawl onto his lap and kiss him senseless, Alyx instead settled for what she hoped was a pleased but not completely insane or creepy half-smile.

"I meant... well... I've, uh, wanted to do that... well, for awhile now," Gordon murmured so quietly that Alyx wondered if she'd been imagining his voice. She gently brought her right hand around her body and tipped Gordon's chin up so that their eyes met, and she was both intrigued and slightly amused by the wide-eyed look of... nervousness? shock? lust?... displayed on his face. Smiling shyly, she moved her hand away and kissed him again, wondering as a foreign feeling rushed through her how such a simple action could have such a strong effect on her body. She nearly giggled as Gordon made a soft sound at the back of his throat, but he didn't protest. Alyx simply let her body relax into the kiss, feeling more content and complete than she ever had in her life.

* * *

><p>Gordon was pretty sure he'd never been this happy in his entire life. No, scratch that, he was completely sure. If he dropped dead in the next second, he would surely die the happiest man to ever live. He certainly hadn't been... aiming... for this to happen, but he wasn't going to be one to complain. After trying to ignore his growing... crush?... on Alyx for so long, it felt wonderful just to relax and do what felt natural. Well, what he thought was completely natural, anyway. If she could tell that he was almost completely inexperienced, she hadn't let on, and he wondered idly if Alyx had ever... no, he didn't want to think about that. He just wanted to

enjoy this.

Over the course of several... minutes? hours?... they had managed to turn more towards each other so that Alyx's long legs were draped over Gordon's lap, and his left hand was resting comfortably around her waist. Her right hand was slowly wandering around his back... his shoulders... through his hair... _damn_, it felt good. They were so engrossed in what they were doing, as a matter of fact, that they paid no attention to the sound of crunching gravel as a rickety pickup truck slowed to a stop near the Inn. They also didn't hear the slight chuckle as the driver hopped out of the cab of the truck and slowly crept towards them.

"Greetings, lovebirds!" boomed a loud, friendly voice from somewhere above them. _'Oh God... please __tell me that's not...'_ Gordon cringed and slowly opened one eye and then the other, fearing the worst. His eyes took in the worn boots, the patched jeans, the flannel shirt... and finally, the grinning face of Barney Calhoun, towering over them and laughing like a madman. Gordon inwardly groaned, bracing himself for whatever was going to come out of Barney's mouth in the next couple of seconds. His friend had loved to make off-color jokes about Gordon's love life—“or rather, typical lack of one”—for almost as long as Gordon known the (now former) security guard and he otherwise found Barney to be one of the bravest and most trustworthy friends he had ever had. However, even though Gordon was used to this one aspect of Barney's personality, he knew it made Alyx uncomfortable, and the thought of Alyx's discomfort made Gordon _very_ uncomfortable. He braced for impact.

"And to think," Barney gasped through wall-shaking guffaws, "Kleiner thought... you guys would hold out another whole... week! As soon as they re-invent beer... he _so_ owes me one!" Gordon blushed and looked at the floor, wondering how Alyx was taking this. _'Oh God... she's going to hate me for this. If she ever looks at me again long enough to communicate her hatred, anyway,'_ he thought, his good mood quickly being replaced by a feeling of mortified dread. Offering a silent apology to God for denying his existence earlier, Gordon prayed to disappear, preferably forever. _'And if that's not an option, I'd settle for an opportunity to kill Barney with an icicle...'_ Despite the fact that Gordon had simply suffered through Barney's endless—and often quite... graphic—jokes about his completely nonexistent sex life for so long, Barney was about to cross the line this time. _'Hopefully the damage won't be too bad...'_

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Alyx, to his surprise, simply extricated herself from Gordon's embrace and stood up to stare at Barney at eye level. Gordon cautiously lifted his head to look at them... he had a feeling something interesting was about to happen, and he didn't want to miss it, all humiliation aside. Barney grinned, looking very much like the cat who had devoured the canary, and turned towards Alyx. "So," he began casually, "did I ruin the magic before you got to the crowbar action?" He winked at Gordon, his typical way of communicating that he was only kidding. _'Well, _I_ know that,'_ Gordon thought, somewhat exasperated, _'but Alyx doesn't.'_

Alyx leveled a calm gaze at Barney for about three seconds, then suddenly snapped forward and grabbed Barney's wrist, twisting it behind his back at an unnatural-looking angle. Almost instantly, Barney fell to his knees, and Gordon was unable to suppress the

laughter that bubbled up through his chest and exploded from his mouth in a fit of hysterics. Something about Barney being so completely defeated by a girl in a matter of seconds was still hilarious, even if sexism didn't really exist anymore. Alyx looked over at him and grinned, then turned back to Barney. "Want me to stop?" Barney nodded. "Then drop it. Now." Barney nodded again, and Alyx kept her end of the bargain and let go of his wrist.

Rubbing his arm and looking somewhat like a wounded puppy, Barney appeared to be trying to hold back one of his classic obnoxious comebacks. After a moment, he settled on "Well, I'll be in the truck if you guys want a ride back to the base. It's getting late." Indeed it was, with the sun already starting to set. Gordon blushed, realizing how long he and Alyx had been... going at it. A quick glance at her face revealed that she was probably having similar thoughts. After clapping Gordon on the shoulder—a gesture that he still wasn't sure how to respond to—Barney stepped outside, and as soon as both feet had reached the other side of the doorway, Gordon heard his friend's laughter resume. "And they thought nobody else saw it coming," Barney muttered under his breath, chuckling. He sounded as if he was continuing, but the closing of the truck's driver side door made it impossible to make out his words.

Gordon stood up awkwardly, wondering what exactly he was supposed to do now. Alyx's epic... pwnage, he thought, remembering a word he hadn't heard in an awfully long time... of Barney had done a decent job of diffusing the awkward situation, but he felt it coming back now. He pushed his glasses back up his nose—they'd become crooked at some point during their, uh, makeout session, for lack of a better way to put it—and hesitantly looked over at Alyx. She met his gaze and giggled, a beautiful blush coloring her face. She stepped forward and enveloped Gordon in a hug. After a moment of shock, he figured she probably expected him to return the hug, so he awkwardly wrapped his arms around her waist to stall for time until he figured out what to do next.

"Just so you know," she whispered into his ear, causing his knees to momentarily threaten to give out, "I'd been meaning to do that for awhile too." She turned her head, resting it on his shoulder, before she spoke again. "Maybe we should've started with this... but I really like you, Gordon." His whole mouth went dry and Gordon struggled to form a coherent sentence, having waited so long to hear those words. "I... I like you too, Alyx," he finally stammered out, wondering if he should add something else. Elaborate a bit, maybe. Tell her how happy he was that they had both been through hell and back together. Or something.

He was jolted out of his thoughts by the insistent honk of the truck's horn, followed by Barney opening the door and hollering "You two lovebirds have sixty seconds to get your asses over here, or you're walking back... I mean it!" Gordon blushed yet again and lowered his arms, slowly peeling himself away from Alyx. He was startled by how strange it felt not to be touching her now, when just a few hours ago, he had felt exactly the opposite. "Guess we should get going," Alyx said, laughing. Before he could formulate a semi-clever response to that, she grabbed his hand and pulled him towards the truck.

They settled themselves in the cramped backseat, and Barney started the engine. Before shifting into drive, he turned around. "Think you

can keep your hands to yourselves for about ten minutes? Don't corrupt my innocent mind," he said, grinning. Gordon rolled his eyes. _'Innocent mind, my ass...' _Alyx made a noise that suggested she agreed, and Gordon laughed. Deciding not to test Barney anymore—and knowing that if they did, it would come back to haunt them, Gordon elected to close his eyes and finally try to take that nap he'd been going for... earlier.

He smiled, and his mind wandered back to his earlier philosophical song analysis. _'I guess this is the hope I'd always been hearing mixed in,'_ he mused. _'The world may still be comparatively empty, but...'_ Well, he was probably still the happiest man alive. He felt Alyx reach for his hand, and sighed contentedly. _'It'll be okay, someday,'_ he thought as he felt himself dozing off. _'We'll make it work.'_

* * *

><p>â€| And I've been knocking, but no one answers,
And I've been knocking most all the day...
Oh, and I've been calling, oh, hey, hey, Johnny,
Can't you come out, can't you come out to play?_

Johnny,

Can't you come out to play

In your empty garden?...

* * *

><p>Author's note: Revised December 2012. Same exact story, just with some corrections to minor punctuation errors and factual inconsistencies that have been bugging me since right after I published this the first time. Barney's somewhat obnoxious behavior has also been slightly toned down and more thoroughly explained... I think I was in a bad mood about something else and kind of took it out on my portrayal of his character when I wrote this. Well, better late than never, right?

End
file.